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Student evaluation of teacher performance, or student ratings, is one of the most controversial techniques used to identify teacher effectiveness. Few faculty members question the usefulness of ratings in providing feedback about teaching that can result in improved instruction, but many continue to challenge student rating use in making personnel decisions (Marsh and others 1979).

This Digest offers a rationale for the use of student ratings, describes the research findings concerning the validity and reliability of such ratings, and identifies the major issues involved in designing and administering rating forms and reporting their results.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF STUDENT RATINGS

Aleamoni (1981) offers the following arguments to support the use of student ratings of

teacher performance:

--Students are the main source of information about the learning environment, including teachers' ability to motivate students for continued learning, rapport or degree of communication between instructors and students.

--Students are the most logical evaluators of the quality, the effectiveness of, and satisfaction with course content, method of instruction, textbooks, homework, and student interest.

--Student ratings encourage communication between students and their instructor. This communication may lead to the kind of student and instructor involvement in the teaching-learning process that can raise the level of instruction.

--Student ratings of particular instructors and courses can be used by other students to select courses and instructors, and may increase the chances that excellence in instruction will be recognized and rewarded.

FACULTY CONCERNS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

Faculty are concerned about the use of student ratings in both formative and summative evaluations for the following reasons: 1) students lack the maturity and expertise to make judgments about course content or instructor style; 2) students' ratings are measures of popularity rather than of ability; 3) the rating forms themselves are both unreliable and invalid; and 4) other variables (such as grades received from the instructor, class size, or whether the course was required or elected) affect student ratings.

Research that addresses each of these issues is summarized below.

Student Immaturity

According to Peterson and Kauchak (1982), "researchers found that student ratings of teachers are consistent among students and reliable from one year to the next." Aleamoni (1981) cites research that indicates that "the correlation between student ratings of the same instructors and courses ranged from .70 to .87."

Student Ratings as Measures of Popularity

Citing his own research, Aleamoni (1981) found that students frankly praised instructors for their warm, friendly, humorous manner in the classroom, but if their courses were not well-organized or their methods of stimulating students to learn were poor, the students equally frankly criticized them in those areas."

Researchers cited by Peterson and Kauchak (1982) found that "students can

successfully differentiate between teaching effectiveness and other affective dimensions such as attitude, interest, and friendliness of the teacher."

Student Rating Forms

Research evidence supports the view that carefully constructed evaluation instruments with well-developed procedures for their administration can yield high internal consistency reliabilities. Most of the research evidence supporting the validity of rating forms in which student ratings were compared to other methods of evaluation (colleague ratings, student learning measures, and expert judges' ratings) indicates the existence of high to moderate positive correlations.

Grades

According to Aleamoni (1981), "correlational studies have reported widely inconsistent grade-rating relationships. Some 22 studies have reported zero relationships while another 28 studies have reported significant positive relationships. In most instances, however, these relationships were relatively weak."

Class Size

Research is also divided on this issue. The belief that instructors of larger classes receive lower ratings is supported by the results of some studies and refuted by others.

Required Versus Elected Courses

Most of the reported research seems to support the belief that students who are required to take a course rate it lower than students who elect to take the same course.

DESIGNING THE RATING FORMS

Rating forms can be adopted from other institutions, or constructed by students, faculty, administrators, or committees. Experts in questionnaire design should be involved in the development of student rating forms to avoid producing a finished questionnaire that reflects a bias toward any one aspect of instructional effectiveness.

It is most important to decide the purpose of the form. Formative evaluation requires information that can be used by the instructor to modify and improve instruction. Summative evaluation requires information that can be used by a third party for decisions about promotion, tenure, or merit pay. Each kind of evaluation requires that decisions be made about the content, level of inference, and type of item response.

ADMINISTERING THE RATING FORMS

The method of administering and gathering student responses can determine the quality

of the resulting data. If possible, the responsibility should be given to instructional development or testing personnel.

Regardless of who does the actual administration, a standard set of instructions and a designated time limit for filling out the questionnaire are essential. Informal administration can lead to bias in the ratings, low return of the forms, or less than candid responses on the part of students.

REPORTING THE RESULTS

If the results of student ratings are not reported in a timely manner, their usefulness can be compromised. Decisions must be made about whether to return the actual form or summaries of the data to the instructor. If the actual forms are returned, then the instructors should be given a method of tabulating and summarizing their own results so that they can avoid concentrating on negative or positive feedback alone.

One of the most important decisions to be made is who will see or use the results. Faculty have the right to know how the results will be reported and should be given the option of releasing copies of the results if the evaluation is not mandatory. To avoid subjective interpretations by third parties, it is recommended that students' actual written comments not be reported to the student body or the administration.

Results of the ratings can be reported in student newspapers or student published books. Reporting the results in this way is most effective if it is done in a positive manner with only the most highly rated instructors or courses listed.

Finally, Aleamoni (1981) is careful to point out that the way student ratings are used is of utmost importance. All who use the ratings must be careful to avoid placing inappropriate emphasis on selected student responses. Ideally, student ratings are but one component of a comprehensive instructional evaluation system.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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